



COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL

Purpose The purpose of this activity is to help educators communicate with each other for improvement by using a communication protocol to examine classroom practices, classroom and schoolwide data, professional learning practices, and/or leadership processes. This protocol provides a structured, formal process of presentation, inquiry, reflection, and action.

Target Audience Any education team interested in improving teaching and learning practices.

Time This protocol can be used in one and one-half hours to a half-day or full day sessions.

Materials Examples of student work, student data, teacher data, schoolwide data, lesson designs, activity protocols, meeting evaluations, case studies, or any other samples of materials for a team to critique. Participants will need note pads for note taking. Timekeeper will need accurate clock or stopwatch.

Overview

Staff can appreciate the power of teamwork and collaboration, but often they are not used to working in teams, or asking for support for their continuous improvement. This is a process that can help build a culture of collaborative inquiry, leading to teaching improvement and student learning for all students, without blame or defensiveness.

This communication protocol is based on the *Coalition of Essential Schools' Tuning Protocol*.¹ A protocol is a formal professional learning process that:

- ♦ is job-embedded.
- ♦ promotes reflection and ongoing assessment.
- ♦ focuses on the student as the ultimate beneficiary of the process.
- ♦ honors the strengths of the work.
- ♦ examines areas for improvement relative to the teacher's desire and need to improve.
- ♦ creates an invitational climate for teaching and learning conversations.
- ♦ impacts individual and collaborative practice.
- ♦ empowers all who participate in the process to more thoughtfully consider multiple options for classroom practice.

PROTOCOL TIMING

- 15 min:** *Presenter sets context for the work; uses examples of student work, student data, case studies, lesson plans, etc. Presenter poses two key questions she/he wants colleagues to address.*
- 5 min:** *Participants ask clarifying questions.*
- 5 min:** *Participants and presenter spend time in reflective writing, organizing notes and thoughts.*
- 15 min:** *Participants discuss their observations and thoughts, and begin to explore options, consider gaps, and seek solutions or recommendations among themselves with no input from the presenter.*
- 15 min:** *Presenter reflects verbally on participants' discussion while team members silently take notes. Presenter describes next steps.*
- 10 min:** *Facilitator debriefs the session.*

¹Reference: Coalition of Essential Schools' Tuning Protocol, www.essentialschools.org/resources/60#3. Retrieved 02/25/12.

Process Protocol

The directions that follow are common for using a communication protocol to gain insight and provide feedback:

- Step 1.** Enlist your learning teams (i.e., grade level/subject area) to study improvement in program and process implementation to improve student learning. (Team sizes of four to six are usually the most efficient.)
- Step 2.** Establish a date, time, and location for the team meeting.
- Step 3.** Explain the purpose, goal, and outcomes of the *protocol process*.
- Step 4.** Describe the particular process that you will be using, including the steps for using group expertise and the timeline for the process. Assign a timekeeper and a recorder.
- Step 5.** Determine whether or not the team will be using a “Process Observer,” a team member whose job it is to watch and listen to the group dynamics, making sure everyone speaks, that time is adhered to, and that conversations are staying true to the purpose of the meeting.
- Step 6.** Introduce and facilitate the discussion.
- Step 7.** Presenter gives a presentation and sets the context for the work, using examples of student work, student data, case study, lesson plan, etc., to be examined with no interruptions from participants. (15 minutes)

The presenter poses two key questions she/he is asking colleagues to address. For example: *What other things can I do to help these children learn to read? How can I deal with a whole class of different abilities while helping a very small group of children with specific reading skills?* Secondary question: *How do I help students learn to read so they can learn history? How do I help students learn to read while I am teaching history?*

- Step 8.** Participants ask clarifying questions. (5 minutes)
- Step 9.** The participants and presenter spend time in reflective writing, organizing notes and thoughts. (The presenter might want to collect these notes later. If so, make sure everyone is aware of this intent at the beginning of the session.) (5 minutes)
- Step 10.** Participants discuss their observations and thoughts, and begin to explore options, consider gaps, and seek solutions or recommendations among themselves with no input at this time from the presenter. The presenter listens and takes notes. (15 minutes)

Three types of feedback might be provided, as long as the approaches are agreed to at the beginning of the session:

- ♦ Warm—participants are supportive and describe what they think will work in the process.
- ♦ Cool—participants describe elements of the presentation that deserve further examination, i.e., “have you considered what might happen if you tried _____?”
- ♦ Hard—participants ask more probative questions that go deeper into the presentation.

(Facilitator may want to limit each person’s initial response, before a discussion, to two minutes.)

- Step 11.** Presenter reflects verbally on participants’ discussion while team members silently take notes in preparation for debriefing time. Presenter describes next steps. (15 minutes)
- Step 12.** Facilitator debriefs the session with both the presenter and the coaching team by reviewing the process, summarizing the steps, and asking participants to comment on their participation and observations. A process observer may be asked to give reflective comments about the entire group process. (10 minutes)

Comments to the Facilitator

Participants need to be prepared to actively contribute to the discussions with probing questions and/or comments, and be supportive and respectful of the roles of the presenter, facilitator, observer, time keeper, recorder, etc.

The facilitator, or “Process Observer,” should make sure that there is a balance of feedback during the process, as well as be willing to coach the presenter and participants in advance about the difference between feedback and evaluation. Feedback is a reaction to the information. Evaluation is an assessment of the value of the information.

When using a “Process Observer,” the facilitator may close with the observer’s comments on the entire process using detail on the following, for example: how many times group members spoke; to what degree the group members were engaged; group norms that were implemented; at what point the group, as a whole, became a team; how the presenter engaged or disengaged.